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Their Eyes Were Watching a Goddess: Zora Neale Hurston's Vodou Subtext

Laura Sheffler

Written in Haiti but set in Florida, Zora Neale Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) makes rich use of Vodou¹ traditions and symbols to empower African American women. As a religion of Haitian slaves, Vodou was both an act of faith and of political rebellion. African slaves continued to find power in the evocation of their gods to defy colonial rule.² The novel serves as a kind of palimpsest, where Hurston overtly presents the physical journey of the main character, Janie Crawford, but also reveals the spiritual journey to those attuned to the Vodou subtext. Tapping into the subverted powers of the Vodou pantheon and rituals, she acknowledges the dark forces of the Petro gods, but appeals more fervently to the gentler Rada gods as a source of feminine empowerment. A deeper reading of Hurston's text reveals the mythical significance of her story.

Several scholars focus on the Vodou references in Hurston's works, including Daphne Lamothe, Brenda Smith, and Derek Collins, who make convincing arguments that Janie Crawford represents the incarnation of Erzulie,³ goddess of love and women. Janie, in her search for self, reflects many traits of the Vodou goddess, including her sensual nature, her preference for the sacred color blue, her mulatto skin tone, and her long black hair. In addition, Lamothe separates the incarnations of Erzulie into her Rada and Petro forms, Erzulie Freda and Erzulie Danto. Rada spirits, considered more peaceful and benevolent, belong to the nation of gods that accompanied the slaves to the new world from ancestral Africa. The Petro spirits, more violent and wrathful, are drawn from Central Africa and creolized in Haiti. These more vengeful spirits rise from the rage and suffering of Africans transported into the New World (Fernández Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert 121). Erzulie Freda represents Janie's sensual nature, typically figured as the goddess of love and luxury, and the Petro form, Erzulie Danto, represents her more violent form as a dark protective mother.

While Smith attributes violent actions in the novel to Erzulie's Petro form, it seems instead that these actions may be associated with Tea Cake, who appears in the text as Legba, the gateway god. Considering the evidence revealed in Tea Cake's physical description and actions, alongside the role of the rabid dog and the hurricane, Janie's relationship with him becomes spiritual as well as dangerous. In Vodou mythology, Erzulie takes three husbands: Damballa, the god of the sky; Agwe, the god of the water; and Ogoun, the warrior god. Similar to Erzulie, Janie takes three husbands; while neither Logan Killicks nor Jody Starks reveal god-like traits, Janie's third husband, Tea Cake, does. The destructive hurricane that envelops the text is not the work of Erzulie Danto, or the wrath of the sometimes violent Legba, but is instead an expression of the jealous nature of Agwe who, in his fury, solicits the aid of Damballa and Ogoun for his revenge on Legba.

Vodou practitioners call the open space at the center of the temple the “peristyle.” Erected at the center of the peristyle is a “porteau-mitan,” which serves as “the post that links the heavenly worlds” (Hurbon 69). Janie’s counterpart in the novel is not one of the three gods married to Erzulie. Instead, Hurston presents her counterpart as the gateway god, the porteau-mitan, the pathway to the heavens, Legba. While the goddess Erzulie does not take Legba as her husband, she is courted by him (74). When evoking the gods, the faithful must first approach Legba. Guarding entrances and crossroads, he alone arbitrates who may have access to the gods. He “open[s] the way for other gods to be present at tribal rituals” (Haskins 39) and is the protector of the home (Hurbon 140). Hurston references Legba in *Tell My Horse* (1938): he “provides way to all things” (393). Indeed, he does so in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*—he provides the way for Janie Crawford to recognize her spiritual path.

The narrative frame structure of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* expresses the story of Janie’s life through her words to her initiate Pheoby. Hurston, in this structure, then becomes the speaker of the spell, and in a sense the initiated priestess who evokes the goddess Erzulie in the character of Janie. Many critics condemn Hurston for her lack of attention to race issues in the United States,⁴ but just as Vodou ritual is subverted in the text, so is Hurston’s solution to these issues. Her message, intended for African American women, empowers them to find their own voice. Vodou does not claim to have power over non-believers,⁵ and therefore Hurston cannot be using the evocation of the Rada Goddess, a benevolent spirit, to curse or do harm to white people. Her message is far more powerful. Evil curses can easily be “turned” to reflect back on the person casting the spell. Evoking the Petro gods is dangerous and unpredictable. Instead, Hurston evokes a cure. If the slave mentality of Nanny, if the “mule” mentality of Logan Killicks, if the false god mentality of Joe Starks can be overcome, black women become agents of power. Vodou already sees women as equal vessels for the powers and words of the gods, and no power distinction exists between the races. The gods will speak through a man as well as a woman, as long as he or she remain faithful. Hurston, in the role of a Vodou mamba, can use her words to evoke black empowerment. She can use her words in the form of the novel to call the goddess Erzulie and to cast a cure.

But first, Janie must overcome Nanny and her representation of the slave mentality: “Honey, de white man is the ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able tuh find out” (Hurston, *Their Eyes* 14). Hurston details Nanny’s slave experience, her victimization by white slave owners, and her limited belief in the black woman as “de mule uh de world” (14). But Janie has already been enlightened by her sexual awakening under the pear tree, marking “the end of her childhood” (12). Janie’s “conscious life had commenced at Nanny’s gate” where she kisses Johnny Taylor and experiences the first sign of Erzulie’s sexual identity (10). Janie’s recognition of her true nature begins here, at the gate. Legba, the guardian of the gate, ultimately must allow Janie access to the gods and access to the empowering knowledge that she is a goddess. Referring to her first husband, Logan Killicks, Janie does not recognize what she might possibly learn from “some ole skullhead in de grave yard” (13). Skulls and graveyards are the realm of the Vodou spirit Baron Samdi; the earth-rooted head of the dead cannot be an appropriate match for Erzulie, who is the seductive goddess of the water realm and particularly averse to hard work. Janie opposes Logan Killicks, his insistence on her physical labor, and the slave mentality he and Nanny represent. While Janie does not recognize her true self yet, already her instincts align her with a goddess. Hurston’s message for women is double-voiced in Janie’s

rejection of Logan Killicks and in the Vodou subtext that reveals that the goddess within is inappropriately matched with the god of slave labor.

Hurston personifies the next step in Janie's spiritual journey as Joe Starks, whom she meets at the front gate: "[H]e did not represent sun-up and pollen and blooming trees, but he spoke for the far horizon" (29). Joe does not represent the Vodou spirits; he makes *himself* a god. His confidence, evident in his repetition of "I god," his erection of a streetlamp—both phallic and symbolic of a false sun—and his position as mayor all induce the community to "bow down to him" (50). Janie proves herself as a worthy wife of the mayor because of her beauty and silence. Joe's "big voice" drowns Janie out: "It must have been the way Joe spoke out without giving her a chance to say anything one way or another that took the bloom off of things" (43). Words are vitally important in Vodou rituals. Words written on paper have power, as do the songs, chants, and spells of the worshippers. Though Janie will endure twenty years of silencing with Joe Starks, she will ultimately speak. Hurston's text, narrated by Janie to her friend Pheoby, evokes the feminine power. Hurston's message to women, through her own literary voice and the voice of Janie/Erzulie, reinforces the importance of allowing the goddess within to speak.

Words are of vital importance to Janie, and her words also have the power to kill. Joe teaches her to "[press] her lips together and [learn] to hush" (71). After twenty years, she finds her voice again and issues what Joe recognizes as a killing curse: "When you pull down yo' britches," she says to Joe, "you look lak de change of life" (79). Hurston writes that "Janie had robbed him of his illusion of irresistible maleness that all men cherish" (79). Through the power of words, Janie sends Joe into a death spiral. Joe misunderstands the power that Janie wields and seeks "the two headed man [to find] what had been buried against him" (84). Many Vodou spells use a buried object to contain a curse, and the object must be found in order to cure the victim (Haskins 123). Joe rejects the white doctors and seeks a houngan, a Vodou priest, who can identify and reverse the "trick," the evil spell, that has been cast against him. Joe relies on the Vodou priest because he suspects Janie of poisoning him, a common Vodou curse, and refuses to eat anything she cooks. Hurston, however, does not call on dark powers for Janie's strength. Her words are not a killing curse; it is merely the sharp truth that empowers them. But, as Janie says to Joe, "you don't half know me atall" (86). He curses her with thunder and lightning; little does he know, she represents the goddess Erzulie, who wears the rings of three gods, one of which is from the god of thunder and lightning (86). She is protected by the very nature of her Vodou divinity.

Janie's physical and spiritual path does not end with the death of Joe. She "had been getting ready for a great journey to the horizons in search of people; it was important to all the world that she should find them and they find her," but her journey was derailed by a search for the physical comforts of the wealth of her husbands (89). Now, with the death of Joe, she is ready to continue her spiritual journey. She "jus' loves dis freedom" (93). Sweet cakes are a common food offering to Erzulie, and Tea Cake Woods, like a tea cake itself, proves to be an irresistibly sweet temptation for her. Scents draw Erzulie, the female energy of Legba (Chatland). Hurston uses this Vodou reference in describing Janie's attraction to Tea Cake: "He seemed to be crushing scent out of the world with his footsteps. Crushing aromatic herbs with every step he took. Spices hung about him. He was a glance from God" (106).

She recognizes on their first meeting that “Tea Cake wasn’t strange. Seemed as if she had known him all her life” (99). A Vodou initiate would recognize him, too. Legba travels, wears a hat, and smokes; Tea Cake wears a hat, smokes, and “locked the door [to Janie’s store] and shook it to be sure and handed her the key” (98). Here, Hurston reveals him as the Catholic counterpart of Saint Peter, with the keys to heaven, and the Vodou protector of the home (140). Legba, the first *Iwa* (spirit) evoked at Vodou rites, opens the door to the Great Road, which symbolizes the connection between the spirit world and the temporal world, the horizon. In addition, Tea Cake’s last name, “Woods,” evokes the wooden porteau-mitan that Legba inhabits. Janie’s crucial meeting with Tea Cake furthers her spiritual journey. She “opened the window and let Tea Cake leap forth and mount to the sky on the wind. That was the beginning of things” (107). Tea Cake confirms this with another allusion to Saint Peter when he tells her twice, “You got de keys to de kingdom” (109, 121). Hurston clearly establishes Tea Cake as the incarnation of Legba, and it is this third relationship that poses the greatest challenge to Janie’s spiritual advancement.

Janie, drawn to “the subtle but compelling rhythms of the Bahaman drummers,” finds herself attracted to the gateway god (139). Vodou followers use ritual dances and drumming to induce trances and possession (Hurbon 31). Tea Cake plays music and dances in the jooks and muck, aligning him with these Vodou rituals. In addition to gateway imagery, Legba can also be identified by the color red and violent possessions (Hurbon 140), as seen when Tea Cake “peeped up over the door sill of the world and made a little foolishness with red,” marking another allusion to the horizon (Hurston, *Their Eyes* 120). Tea Cake is violent throughout the novel: he knocks out the teeth of a boogerboo, takes a switchblade to a man, struggles with Nunkie, hurls Janie to the floor in a passion, whips Janie, destroys Mrs. Turner’s restaurant, kills the rabid dog, and attempts to kill Janie with the pistol. While Lamothe associates these images of violence with Janie in her Erzulie Danto form, a Petro goddess, these descriptions do not actually reveal Janie’s violence (163). Her goddess imagery maintains its Rada form.

Although Janie confronts Tea Cake about his flirtation with Nunkie, she remains the jealous love goddess Erzulie Freda. Tea Cake’s violence marks him as the darker, jealous side of Legba: his Petro opposite, Kalfu. Kalfu also controls gateways and manifests in a dangerous form: “he allows the crossing of bad luck, deliberate destruction, misfortune, injustice” (Chatland). These adjectives aptly describe the events in the last section of the novel. The violence that follows comes as a result of the release of Legba’s Petro form, not Erzulie’s. Janie notes that “[a]ll gods dispense suffering without reason. Otherwise they would not be worshipped. Through indiscriminate suffering men know fear and fear is the most divine emotion. It is the stones for altars and the beginning of wisdom . . . Real gods require blood” (145). In the final part of Janie’s journey, she must feel suffering and the divine emotion fear, and she must also sacrifice real blood. Tea Cake will be the sacrificial price for her final transition into the spiritual realm. As the violence of the storm comes, “six eyes were questioning *God*” (159). This fearful questioning, required for Janie’s transcendence to the spirit world, is not all that is required.

Legba channels the words of the gods to the people, and the people to the gods. He was never meant to be a stopping point for Janie’s spiritual journey, but rather the gateway to her spiritual home. Tea Cake Woods serves as the porteau-mitan, the wooden post that becomes the portal to the spirit world. Erzulie wears the rings of three gods and not the ring of Legba.

Tea Cake courts Janie with images of the fisherman; he takes her night fishing, and they fry and eat fish together (102). At the end of the novel, Pheoby, Janie's best friend, remarks that she "means tuh make Sam take [her] fishin'," following Janie's footsteps (192). Fishermen and the ships in the opening scene of the novel are not associated with Legba; they are associated with Agwe, the god of the sea and Erzulie's rightful husband. Deluges indicate Erzulie Danto's fury, and Lamothe argues that Danto's rage, in the form of the hurricane over Lake Okechobee, "erupts as a violent reminder to the folk that their passive faith in Euro-Americans, or Christianity, to determine their fate is misguided" (166). The hurricane, however, is not an expression of Danto's power, but rather a battle between Erzulie's jealous lovers. Agwe, god of the sea, courts Janie through Tea Cake, and as his proxy becomes too close to his wife, the water god rises: "It woke up old Okechobee and the monster began to roll in his bed" (158). The imagery reflects a lake, not a deluge. Again, Hurston emphasizes the wrath of the gods when Tea Cake realizes, "Ah never knowed you wuz so satisfied wid me lak dat." The dialogue is interrupted when "the wind came back in triple fury" (160). The triple fury mirrors the fury of Erzulie's three husbands. The gods' triple rage interrupts the thought that Janie may be satisfied with Legba. While Hurston could have revealed Erzulie Danto's terrible powers through the hurricane, she chooses instead to leave this violence to the men. The feminine powers Hurston taps into remain benevolent.

The rising of the lake, representative of the sea god, threatens Janie and Tea Cake. Hurston repeats, "De lake is comin'!" and emphasizes the visual of the "water and wind playing upon [the lake] in fury" (162, 165). Damballa, god of the sky, plays his part as "a big burst of thunder and lightning trampled over the roof of the house" (159-60). The three gods—the wind, the water, and the war—prompt Janie to respond, "Ole Massa is doin' his work now" (159). Erzulie Danto does not wield this power; she remains vulnerable to the powers of the lake as "the monstropolous beast had left his bed" (161). Erzulie's gods are jealous gods, and Tea Cake admits, "Ah was fumblin' round and God opened de door" (159). The gateway god has inadvertently allowed the full powers of these gods access to the physical world, and his negligence leads to tragedy. Hurston's mythical representation of the battle of the gods serves to drive Janie—as Erzulie—toward the blood sacrifice she is required to make. If she is to fully recognize herself as a goddess, she must, as in Vodou practice, make her sacrifices to the gods. Ultimately this sacrifice will reunite Erzulie with her proper husbands.

Legba is often depicted with a dog, and in the curious scene where a rabid dog threatens Janie, Tea Cake intervenes. He tells her to grab hold of the tail of the swimming cow (165). An ox tail is a Vodou talisman that makes those who hold it "invulnerable to weapons" (Hurbon 40); they serve literally as *garde-corps*, or body guards. While Tea Cake attempts to protect Janie from the wrath of the gods, Legba's very symbol, the dog, turns against her to drive her away. In Vodou practice, madness is a punishment by the gods. The dog acts as the vehicle through which the gods exact their vengeance. In his fury, Agwe punishes Legba and sets his symbol against him. The sacrifice of Legba's love is Janie's last step to the spirit world, to those things that keep her attached to the *porteau-mitan*, to Tea Cake Woods, and the physical world. In his book, Hurbon argues that "Legba, nicknamed the trickster, through whose agency one may deceive fate . . . represents change and strife" (16). Here, Hurston emphasizes the change and strife Janie must endure. She is literally and spiritually in danger of deceiving fate and avoiding her destiny by staying with Tea Cake.

After Tea Cake saves Janie by fighting off the rabid dog, he takes on one of the most frightful Vodou forms. Ironically, he is conscripted to bury the dead and becomes one of the living dead himself. He refuses food, and “water done turn’t against [him]” (176). Rabies, of which hydrophobia is a symptom, turns Tea Cake against water, as well as the water goddess Erzulie. Tea Cake explains his Petro god possession in Vodou imagery: “somethin’ jumped on me heah last night and choked me.” Janie explains that “maybe it wuz uh witch ridin’ yuh, honey.” Hurston describes the influence of the hydrophobia as “the demon [that] was there before him, strangling, killing him quickly” (175). Tea Cake’s spirit has been captured as he is possessed by the Petro god, and he is reduced to a purely physical form. Zombification is thought to be the “supreme punishment of the gods, as it reduces the individual to a slave” (Hurbon 62). Tea Cake is punished for his inappropriate relationship with Janie, and the jealous gods succeed in driving them apart. Tea Cake, “the son of the Evening Sun, had to die for loving [Janie]” (Hurston, *Their Eyes* 178). Hurston evokes more zombie imagery in describing Tea Cake: “Janie saw a changing look come in his face. Tea Cake was gone. Something else was looking out of his face” (181). Tea Cake gives Janie “a look of blank ferocity and gurgled in his throat” (182), and he adopts a “queer loping gait” and a “queer cold voice” (183). Janie goes “mad with fear as she had done in the water that time,” and ultimately defends herself by shooting the “fiend” in Tea Cake (184). According to Wendy Dutton in her research on Vodou in Hurston’s works, “[z]ombies are created as an act of revenge,” and Erzulie’s husbands have much to avenge (142). Tea Cake has intervened in the courtship between Agwe and his wife, and threatens to trap Erzulie willingly in the physical realm. The goddess of love may lose herself to Legba’s charms.

As Janie had predicted, “real gods require blood,” and this blood sacrifice affords Janie not only the opportunity to live, but the opportunity to transcend (145). She passes through Legba’s gates into the spiritual world. She is tried by the courts who rule Tea Cake’s death as accidental, and she is once again free. Janie, now free to transcend the judgements of the physical world, passes through the gatekeeper’s *porteau-mitan*. Having recognized her identity as a goddess, she has experienced and released the love of men, even those most dear to her, and realized that she has a place in the spiritual realm. She has discovered her independence and recognized the spiritual realm from which she comes.

At the end of the novel, Janie describes her spiritual journey as “tuh de horizon and back” and gives her initiate, Pheoby, wisdom learned from the journey (191). She phrases her understanding in terms that Erzulie, the goddess of love and the sea, would identify with: “Love is lak de sea. It’s u movin’ thing, but still and all, it takes its shape from de shore it meets, and it’s different with every shore” (191). Pheoby responds that she has “grewed ten feet higher from jus’ listenin’ tuh you, Janie” (192). Janie’s incantation empowers Pheoby to strive for more. The sound imagery at the end of the novel emphasizes “singing and sobbing” (192). Just as Erzulie Freda ends every romantic relationship with weeping, so does Janie (Chatland). She caught life and “called in her soul to come and see” (Hurston, *Their Eyes* 193). Janie’s spiritual journey ends with a spiritual reunion with Legba. Janie crosses over—not in a physical sense to a realm of death but in a united physical and spiritual sense through her sacrifice of Tea Cake. Janie physically comes home to her Eatonville house, but also spiritually home to the horizon. There, she recognizes Tea Cake in his spiritual form: “Then Tea Cake came prancing around her where she was and the song of the sigh flew out of the window and lit in the top of the pine

trees" (193). Hurston also associates Tea Cake with the Vodou god of the horizons and with Lazarus, one who is born again; he wears "the sun for a shawl. Of course he wasn't dead" (193). Ultimately Tea Cake Woods returns to his porteau-mitan, represented by the pine tree. He did not belong in the physical world, and as Janie/Erzulie completes her journey, Tea Cake/Legba completes his.

As a young child, Janie did not recognize herself as the "real dark little girl with the long hair" in a photograph (9). At first she did not recognize the goddess within her because she could only see the physical world. With the rejection and the destruction of false gods, with her blood sacrifice in Tea Cake, and with her supplication through Legba, the porteau-mitan to the Vodou gods, Janie's spiritual journey is not only charted in the novel, it is achieved.

While the dangerous aspect of Kalfu, the Petra twin of Legba, appears in the text, "Erzulie Danto, the black goddess who is associated with maternal rage" does not (Lamothe 161). In fact, for a woman who marries three times, children are remarkably absent in the text. Ultimately, Hurston chooses not to empower the dark goddess, though the possibility presents itself. Through the power of her words, the telling of Janie's life, Hurston evokes only Erzulie Freda, the goddess of love and women to cast a healing cure over racial wounds.

Tracing Hurston's Vodou imagery reveals how inaccurate Richard Wright was when he stated that the text "carries no theme, no message, no thought" (75). Vodou has long been used as a method of rebellion and liberation in Haiti, and "Vodou was for the slaves a language, a way of expressing and resisting their cultural and religious assimilation" (Laguerre 70). Hurston's use of a Vodou subtext suggests the power of the double voice. One can overtly disguise the subverted rebellion, just as Janie's voice both reveals and disguises the goddess within. Hurston challenges the feminine norms of her time where black women are enslaved, silenced, used as props for male power, and disconnected from their divine natures. As Lamothe notes, Hurston's work *Tell My Horse* "highlights the potential threat in the [Vodou] tradition to upend hierarchies and disrupt social order" (166). Hurston also does this through the spiritual journey of Janie Crawford. If women recognize themselves as goddesses, they will not likely submit to unjust social norms. Rachel Stein agrees when she says Vodou "undermines the ground of racist and sexist colonial hierarchies and provides black women a means of redefining themselves in positive and defiantly fluid terms" (474). Hurston's Vodou subtext enriches her positive message of female empowerment, pointing out their benevolent divinity. Relying on the manifestation of Erzulie's Rada spirit through Janie's journey of self-discovery and ultimate independence, Hurston encourages women to follow in her footsteps.

Richard Wright, alongside other Harlem Renaissance writers, were likely not attuned to the power of Vodou imagery, and therefore could not see the spiritual message that Zora Neale Hurston evokes in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*; their eyes were focused on the wrong gods. The footprints of Erzulie Freda revealed in palimpsest were not designed for them. Hurston intends the positive underlying message of female empowerment for those, like Pheoby, who were ready to witness the rise of the Goddess.

Notes

1. The term “Voodoo” appears in the source materials with various spellings and distinctions. Here, the term has been regularized to “Vodou” with the exception of citations from sources. “Voodoo” and voodoo practices have not been distinguished from “hoodoo” in this paper. While a distinction exists, both the religion and the practices are referred to as “Vodou” throughout.
2. For a fuller discussion of Vodou as a source of rebellion, see the chapter “Revolutionary Voodoo Leaders” in Michel Laguerre’s *Voodoo and Politics in Haiti* and the opening chapters of Laennec Hurbon’s *Voodoo: Search for the Spirit*.
3. While many of the cited articles and reference books use variations of the name “Erzulie,” including “Erzuli” and “Ezili,” the spelling has been regularized to “Erzulie.”
4. For a brief summary of the critical reception of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and other Hurston texts, see Lovalerie King’s *The Cambridge Introduction to Zora Neale Hurston*, pp. 112-14.
5. For a fuller discussion of the tension between the limits and powers of Vodou, see Haskin’s chapter on “Voodoo and Hoodoo Today” in *Voodoo and Hoodoo*.

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